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ABSTRACT

This document reports on recent research in the United States in the field of early childhood education. The point is made that this research is characterized by conflicting ideologies and rapid change. This conflict revolves around such issues as the relative importance of direct instruction and incidental learning, the emphasis on cognitive learning as opposed to a more broadly based curriculum, and the emphasis on education for the future versus education more presently oriented. Researchers have been concerned with the effect of early childhood education on later school achievement. A decided factor in the results appears to be the degree of continuity or discontinuity between the early childhood and the later school program. A great deal of research supports the importance of the model which the parent sets for the child. In addition, the role assumed by the teacher makes a big difference. Teachers who are more resourceful stimulate more student cooperation, involvement, and activity. Early childhood education has also been widely accepted among its advocates as a contributor to better human relations. The growth of new early childhod education programs seems to be on the upsurge in the United States. Much of this growth is described as chaotic. However, it is concluded, education must contribute to the young child's self-fulfillment in the broadest sense, and early childhood education is a challenge to our best creative thinking. (CK)

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RECENT RESEARCH IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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Foreword

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RECENT RESEARCH IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Given my respect for the people in this room, and the work they are doing throughout the many countries of the world represented here, I consider it a great honor to be with you. I am glad to try to report to you as best I can within the short time allowed some of the significant recent research findings in early childhood education in the United States.

As many of you know, there has been an upsurge of interest in early childhood education in our country which began roughly in 1965 with the initiation of Project Head Start, a program planned to provide educational experiences for some of the most neglected children in our country as a component of the "War on Poverty." Head Start has undergone many changes in the six years that have elapsed, but much of the interest in early childhood education still remains. This interest has not only resulted in the development of new programs which are government funded but has also led to an increase in private and public school programs as well as programs of day care. The development of new programs, particularly government funded programs, has been accompanied by an increased interest in research and evaluation related to these programs. Two major centers, The National Laboratory on Early Childhood Education and the Educational Resources Information Center Clearinghouse on Early Childhood Education represent major efforts to coordinate research and disseminate findings. I shall not go into detail regarding the work of those centers; however, I did want to mention them since their contribution has been significant to the research which I shall report.

It is impossible for me to talk about research in early childhood education in the United States without first referring to the conflicting ideologies which seem to characterize the field and the rapid changes which are taking place. Very briefly let me say that much of the conflict revolves around such issues as the relative importance of direct instruction and incidental learning, the emphasis on cognitive learning as opposed to a more broadly based curriculum, and the emphasis on education for the future versus education more presently oriented. Perhaps, I should add here that play, the topic of this World Assembly, enters actively into the conflict. In some programs self-initiated play is viewed as the major vehicle for learning while in other programs play is an adult prescribed, adult initiated activity. In the latter programs, spontaneous play is often limited to a short period of outdoor activity. Perhaps I need not tell you that we in the United States who are active in the field are finding it necessary to develop in ourselves the ability to assess ideas and theories in order to understand what is nonsense and what looks promising. I assure you that I do not want to become identified with every idea that is coming out of the United States, and I ask you also to make your own evaluation rather than to blindly accept what is published or recorded.

And now with that background I shall speak specifically about recent research findings based on my work of the last two years, first in preparing a compilation of research for the American Association of Elementary-Kindergarten-Nursery Educators, and second as director of a recently completed Office of Education project in which we reviewed over thirteen hundred child development and early childhood education studies.

Many people in our country, both professional and lay, have difficulty accepting early childhood education as worthwile in its own right. And therefore there is among early childhood researchers a constant need to justify its existence. Many researchers have turned to the measurement of the I.Q. before and after school attendance for this justification. As early as the 1940's there was controversy over whether attending nursery school raised the child's I.Q. As new programs began in the mid 60's, researchers again began to look with renewed interest at I.Q. gains as measurable evidence of the success of the program, particularly at Head Start and other intervention programs. Most Head Start programs, for example, produce an intellectual gain of five to ten points, but the results are by no means consistent. The longitudinal studies also show gains tend to level off over a period of two or three years. Participation in intervention programs seems to help in stopping the progressive retardation of lower class children but does not close the gap between them and the middle class children. Studies in which children in one type of curriculum are compared to those in another, such as a comparison of children enrolled in a Montessori School with a regular nursery school or a Bereiter-Englemann-type program, do not show consistent long range I.Q. gains in favor of any one type of program. The highly structured cognitively oriented programs tend to show higher gains early in the program, with children in the less structured programs catching up at about the third year of enrollment.

Researchers have also been concerned with the effect of early childhood education on later school achievement. Results in this area have been inconclusive. Some children achieve better, some do not.

A decided factor in the results appears to be the degree of continuity or discontinuity between the early childhood and the later school program. A concern for children who do not do better led to the development of the Follow-Through Program designed to capitalize on the gains poor children made in preschool programs.

I would now like to mention some of the areas in which research being done has particular implications for early childhood education programs. A number of investigators are wondering whether age three, four, or five is too late to begin to be concerned about the quality of a child's life. They are studying the effect of early stimulation on infants and toddlers, the effect of group care for infants and toddlers, which incidentally has not been provided extensively in our country, and particularly training programs for parents. Practically all of the experimental programs include some kind of involvement of parents, and some are reporting important differences in the maturity of children when low income mothers are trained to help other low income mothers. Some projects include group care along with the training of the mothers. Frequently, home visiting is the major training technique.

We have a great deal of research to support the importance of the model which the parent sets for the child. If the child's parents and intimate associates typically do not exhibit the behavior and motives that the child needs most to learn, and do not reinforce sufficiently such behaviors and motives when they are exhibited by others, it follows that if we, along with Bronfenbrenner, accept the significance of modeling, any appreciable enduring change which is made in the child can be effected only through an appreciable enduring change in the

persons most intimately associated with the child on a day to day basis. This research supplies the basis for the involvement of parents in many early childhood programs.

We are only beginning to delve into what could be an area of major contribution--the role of the teacher. Current indications are that the role assumed by the teacher makes a big difference. Teachers who stimulate children's activities by skillful arrangement of the play materials and by helping children develop their self-initiated play by giving them information when it can be utilized are thought to provide a learning advantage to their children. Teachers who are more resourceful stimulate more student cooperation, involvement, and activity. Resourceful teachers express greater warmth toward children and show greater perceptiveness and more flexibility in meeting the needs and interests of children. They encourage individual responsibility, free expression of feeling and creativity and display greater ingenuity in improving teaching and play material. Unconditional warmth and empathic understanding are reported by Truax and Tatum to be important in facilitating constructive personality change regardless of the age of the human beings involved, regardless of the reason for the encounter and regardless of the setting in which the encounter takes place. If you will recall my opening comments about the conflicting ideologies in early childhood education today, you will understand how important the role of the teacher is in our present controversy. The role of the teacher is frequently defined by the program and varies significantly from one program to another. The ability of teachers to make this adjustment has been questioned and according to current findings, teachers have not always been able to implement all of the behaviors called for by the programs.

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When young children do not show curiosity, do not explore and ask questions, something is wrong. The research on achievement motivation, self-concept, and learning to learn provides some leads to understanding the difficulty. Differences in motivation are associated with the way the child learns to perceive the environment and its rewards for achievement. Willmon reports that educational motivation is greatly influenced by expectancies within the home, by the influence of social interaction, by a satisfying relationship between parent and child, and by self-concept. Self-concept, in particular has been shown to relate to the likelihood that a person will assume an active role in social groups, express his views frequently and effectively, and engage in creative endeavors. Although the development of self-concept has been an expressed goal of the Head Start Program, and persons of low self esteem are more likely to be found in the lower classes, there is no clear-cut pattern of relationships between social class and positive and negative attitude toward the self. High ratings of self-concept have been found to be related to first grade reading achievement.

If you have followed the descriptions of many of the widely publicized programs of cognitive learning in our country, you might have easily gotten the idea that inter-personal behavior was not important. There is, however, continued interest in this area. The relationship between adjustment problems in nursery school and during later life appears to be established. Early childhood education has also been widely accepted among its advocates as a contributor to better human relations. At this point the improvement of human relationships is the focus of two very different kinds of experimentation. Cross-cultural experimental programs involving children and families of

different ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds have been developed and studied. The changing of social behavior by behavior modification techniques using either token reinforcement or social reinforcement has become an essential part of several programs. The use of such techniques is one of the most controversial issues.

Since the theme of this Assembly is "The Educational Role of Play in Early Childhood", I feel it is necessary that I report briefly on the research on play. First, in our recent analysis of 13,000 studies on behavior development of children ages three through five, my colleagues and I found play to be the topic of very little investigation during the last ten years. If we include here also creativity and fantasy, we have some data but the situation is still disappointing. Creativity, according to Ward, is reinforced and elevated by divergent thinking; thus, it would seem possible to elevate systematically the creativity of many children. The success of Torrance in increasing divergent thinking of children to high levels supports this possibility. More divergent thinking seems desirable in the early stages of problem solving, whereas more critical thinking is generally regarded as a successive stage in the process, lying beyond the preschool years. Creativity attains natural expression in play and is enhanced by opportunity for imaginative play. Rated playfulness relates positively to divergent thinking. Planned minimal interventions in children's play can strongly elevate the maturity of play and hence increase its beneficial cognitive effects. Direct sensory experience of handling objects increases the number of non-standard uses of them suggested by children. Smaller classroom group size increases divergent and analytic questioning by young children.

Research on fantasy also is helpful in understanding play. From two to seven the child alternates between assimilative thought and thought adapted to others and to reality, with the latter mode only gradually gaining preeminence. This transition proceeds through the medium of play and eventually through formal games with rules. The preschool child's distinction between reality and fantasy is a very fine one. The child uses fantasy as a means of accommodating progressively to reality through the formulation of symbols and cognitive structures. From age five through age seven representational play, imitation, and conceptual representation are positively related.

Disadvantaged children from poorly organized families have unusually poor demarcation between reality and fantasy. Their inability to play effectively provides one clue to the possible etiology of this deficiency, since play is the procedure through which the child constructs reality. Thus, one suspects that effect upon the child of family disorganization is mediated by its effect upon the child's capacity for play and fantasy. In fantasy, anxiety may work as an inhibitor. The uncertainties associated with family disorganization are possibly productive of such a heightened emotional arousal and hence of poor fantasy development.

In play, children reveal their concerns, uncertainties, fears, and questions. Themes of death and loss of parents are all too common among preschoolers to be ignored. It is through playing out their themes that the child eventually adopts a more realistic view. Doll play is frequently used as a medium to articulate and demonstrate what his other powers of conceptualization and expression represent as yet only most imperfectly. Among advantaged preschoolers, doll play appears to be a better tool for the education of ideas and feelings of those

children who are already doing well. For children who do not yet engage in fantasy play effectively, adult initiation of doll play activities can foster the child's self-directed fantasies with peers. Further, it can be used in play that fosters fantasy.

If by this time you are thoroughly confused, if you have more questions than answers about the recent findings on early childhood education in the United States, then your reactions are normal and absolutely accurate. Some of the questions relate to the areas I have discussed, but there are many others. The growth of new programs seems to have started all over again a reemphasis on the I.Q. which appears to be a completely inadequate method of program evaluation. We have only begun to explore the role of modeling as it relates to the parent and the teacher. The role of the teacher, too, needs further exploration, particularly with respect to whether the teacher actually teaches what she purports to teach and the values to be derived through parent involvement in early childhood education. We badly need more information about what is to be gained or lost through the provision of programs earlier than three years of age. For example, we need to know much more about the relationship of affective development to cognitive learning. What is happening in the United States today is a bit chaotic. We can only hope that the eventual outcome of the chaos will be in the direction of the realization of human dignity and integrity. The humanistic idea of education begins with the idea of man as possessing the potential to select and to create a destiny for himself. Education must contribute to the young child's self-fulfillment in the broadest sense. This is a challenge to our best creative thinking both in the planning of programs and in the evaluation of outcomes of early childhood education.

This paper is based on research analyzed and given in more detail in two recent publications. Complete documentation appears in these reports.

Butler, Annie L. Current Research in Early Childhood Education: A Compilation and Analysis for Program Planners, American Association of Elementary-Kindergarten-Nursery Educators, National Education Association, 1970, 193 Pp.

Butler, Annie L., Gotts, Edward E., Quisenberry, Nancy F., and Thompson, Robert. Literature Search and Development of an Evaluation System in Early Childhood Education, Report I, Researched Characteristics of Preschool Children. Report prepared for the United States Office of Education under contract OEC-0-70-5033-284, April, 1971, 410 Pp.

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